

## Franz Rosenzweig and Jewish and Christian communal boundaries

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### I. Introduction

“The thought of Franz Rosenzweig is arguably the twentieth century’s most enduring monument to Jewish philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> While his work spans the fields of politics and history, religion and philosophy, what concerns us today is his unique and well-developed construal of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. As we explore the contours of his theological system, we will inevitably be struck by the great profundity of certain aspects and the problematic assumptions of other aspects. While his thought is too important to be ignored, especially as we seek to address issues of boundary definition, there are also key points at which we will not be able to follow Rosenzweig or agree with his presuppositions. Nonetheless, we can certainly learn a great deal from his thought, perhaps especially at the points where we disagree.

### II. The Setting

Franz Rosenzweig was born in December 25, 1886 and died of Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), often referred to as “Lou Gehrig’s Disease,” on December 10, 1929. There are several important contextual factors that we must explore in order to understand Rosenzweig’s life and thought.

1) The **Haskalah** was the Jewish Enlightenment, lasting approximately from the 1770s to the 1880s. Inspired by the European Enlightenment, the Haskalah applied the emphasis on reason and intellect to distinctively Jewish endeavors. Jews were encouraged to study secular subjects, to learn both Hebrew and European languages, and to enter fields such as agriculture, crafts, the arts and science. Jews deeply influenced by the Haskalah worked hard to assimilate into European society in dress, language, manners and loyalty to the ruling power. The Haskalah eventually influenced the creation of both the Reform and Zionist movements.<sup>2</sup>

2) **Jewish Emancipation**, which also began in the late 1700s, was the abolition of discriminatory laws against Jews, thus enabling them to attain citizenship and its attendant rights in European countries. Emancipation became a central goal of 19<sup>th</sup> century European Jews and led to the active participation of Jews in civil society. Legal equality was granted to German Jews in 1871, a mere 15 years before Rosenzweig’s birth.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Michael L. Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 122.

<sup>2</sup> See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Haskalah.”

<sup>3</sup> See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Emancipation.”

3) Rates of **Jewish conversion to Christianity** in Germany are estimated to have tripled between 1600 and 1750.<sup>4</sup> Conversion allowed Jews to break free from ghettoized living and enabled them the possibility of upward mobility in society. European Christendom afforded great benefits to professing Christians, and simultaneously—up until the time of emancipation—excluded Jews from nearly all spheres of civil society.

The combination of these three factors, among others, sets the stage for Rosenzweig's life and work. Rosenzweig was raised in a largely secularized German Jewish family, and early on in his life Rosenzweig became "a proud heir of the nineteenth century," aligning himself with the sense of optimism, progress, and faith in reason that pervaded German culture at the time.<sup>5</sup> His own assimilative orientation led him right up to the font of baptism, until his experiences at Yom Kippur services in 1913 assaulted his notion of Judaism's futility and uselessness. It was following this powerful experience that, for Rosenzweig, conversion to Christianity became "no longer necessary," and, in fact, "no longer possible."<sup>6</sup> Instead he decided to immerse himself in Judaism and Jewish life, a journey that would occupy him until his untimely death in 1929. His cousins and close friends Hans and Rudolf Ehrenberg, who had converted to Christianity, became Rosenzweig's lifelong dialogue partners. His conversations with them were responsible in large part for the formulation of his eventual theological position.

In Rosenzweig's initial assessment, "the aloofness and separation of the Jewish people from the world indicated to him a hopeless sterility and a lack of meaning and purpose in [Judaism's] continued existence."<sup>7</sup> In his mature theology, Rosenzweig attributed *positive* significance to this "aloofness" and "separation," and these qualities became the very lifeblood of his rich description of Judaism's vocation. Christianity, according to Rosenzweig, had a completely different function. Its task was to "convert the heathen and to transform the Alpha element of creation—the world in its raw state—into the Omega element of redemption—the world as the place of revelation."<sup>8</sup> His theological system posits very little overlap between the vocations of Judaism and Christianity, yet he sees both of them as existing under the same umbrella of Redemption. Rosenzweig's most sustained treatment of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity appears in Part III of his magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*. It is to this that we now turn.

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah Sadie Hertz, *How Jews Became Germans: The History of Conversion and Assimilation in Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 35. See also Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770-1870* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1978); Christopher Clark, *The Politics of Conversion: Missionary Protestantism and the Jews in Prussia, 1728-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Elishava Carlebach, *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1550-1750* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Briefe* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935), 71, quoted in *Judaism Despite Christianity*, ed. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (New York: Schocken, 1969), 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Judaism Despite Christianity*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> *Judaism Despite Christianity*, 35.

### III. The Star of Redemption

*The Star of Redemption* is notable for its tight, systematic and architectonic structure. The book is divided into three Parts, and each Part has three Books. The book as a whole deals with three fundamental elements (God, world, man) and three movements in the relationship between these elements (Creation, Revelation, Redemption). The first Part deals with the three primary elements in their primordial state and corresponds to the movement of Creation (past); the second part tracks the trajectory by which the three elements come to be related to one another and corresponds to the movement of Revelation (present); and the third part expounds the way in which the intricate and reciprocal interrelations between the three elements will ultimately usher in Redemption (future). It is in Part III that Rosenzweig deals explicitly with Judaism and Christianity, assigning each a function, vocation and task in the movement from Revelation to Redemption.

In Parts I and II, Rosenzweig uses the image of a Star of David—two triangles overlaid upon one another, with the points of the upright triangle representing God, world, and man, and the points of the downward-pointing triangle representing Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. Rosenzweig's star imagery shifts in the third Part, and here he employs the idea of a celestial star, with Judaism representing the star's inner burning core and Christianity representing the rays that emanate outward from the star, carrying its light and heat to its surroundings. This image is paradigmatic for the roles that he assigns to Judaism and Christianity.

#### Judaism: *The Fire or Eternal Life*

Rosenzweig's opening words in his chapter on Judaism (entitled "The Fire or Eternal Life") are worth quoting at length:

Praised be he who has planted eternal life in our midst. The fire burns in the heart of the Star. It is only out of the fire of the center that the rays shine forth and flow outwards irresistibly. The heart of the fire must burn without ever stopping. Its flame must eternally nourish itself. It does not want nourishment from anywhere else. Time must roll past it without power. The fire must beget its own time. It must beget itself eternally. It must make its life eternal in the succession of generations, each of which begets the following one, as it itself again will bear witness to the preceding one. The bearing witness takes place in the begetting. In this connection with the double meaning and single effect of begetting and bearing witness, eternal life becomes real. Past and future, otherwise strangers to each other, the one drawing back when the other's turn comes—here they grow into one: the begetting of the future is a direct bearing witness to the past.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 317.

This passage lays out the central concept that Rosenzweig will spend the rest of the chapter unpacking. Eternal life is the term that Rosenzweig uses to describe the existence and vocation of the Jewish people. They embody—already in time—the presence of eternity. Like the burning core of a star, their existence must continue to burn without reference to the outside. This fire burns according to its own time and the continual begetting of new generations connects past and future, essentially creating the eternal present. The Jewish people bears witness to eternity by *being what it is* and thus serving as a testimony to the world that lives according to natural and human time. The Jewish people’s vocation is characterized by a prescribed inwardness and it is within this inwardness that it lives out the commission of love of neighbor.

The rays that emanate outward (Christianity) exist only by virtue of the burning core; they are utterly contingent upon it. Their life is the product of its life. The core, however, exists without regard to the rays, which add nothing to its fundamental understanding or essence. It remains indifferent to and unaffected by them. Its commission, its means of bearing witness to the world, is to continue its life through the begetting of new generations, to perpetuate *itself*. In this way God has planted eternal life in our midst.

This community has a distinctive relationship with time, for while it shares with other societies the cyclical return of foundational events, “this reactivation of original events does not have as essential function the reliving of a primordial time but, rather, the anticipation of an eschatological time.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, for this community, past events are merely portents of future realities.

Judaism’s inherent inwardness is essential to its vocation and constitutive of its proleptic existence in eternity. “That which for other communities is future and therefore in any case that which is still on the other side of the present—is for it alone already present; for it alone, that which is future is nothing foreign, but something that is its own, something that it carries in its womb, and it can give birth to it every day.”<sup>11</sup> This positioning of the Jewish people between this world and the world to come is lived out in its common life, exemplified by the events of the liturgical year. Rosenzweig offers a detailed interpretation of the significance of these building blocks of Jewish existence, each rife with meaning and the seeds of redemption. The life of the Jewish people foreshadows life in the world to come, and this people thus serves as a pointer toward final redemption. In this way, the Jewish people are a this-worldly manifestation of “eternal life.”

It is for this reason that the Jewish people’s inwardness is indeed part and parcel of their vocation. The Jewish people must be detached from the secular progression of history, and their doing so serves to relativize history lest the world seek Redemption through violence and force, or prematurely believe that it has already attained Redemption. In this way the Jewish people continually reminds the world of its provisionality and incompleteness.

“Against the hours of eternity, which the State in the times of world history carves with a sharp sword into the bark of the growing tree of time, the eternal people every year places

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<sup>10</sup> Stéphane Mosès. *System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 174.

<sup>11</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 318.

untroubled and intact ring upon ring round the trunk of its eternal life.”<sup>12</sup> This alternate existence of the Jewish people “is pushed in front of the eyes of the peoples of the world so that it might silently reprove the worldly, all too worldly illusory eternity of their lies of world historical moments drawn up into States.”<sup>13</sup> Christianity’s vocation, in contrast, does not arch over the progression of secular time, but charts its course through the very heart of secular time.

Christianity: *The Rays or The Eternal Way*

Whereas Judaism’s task is to preserve Revelation in its purest form, Christianity’s task is to effect the proliferation of Revelation. “From the fiery heart of the Star there shoot out the rays. They seek their way through the long night of the times.”<sup>14</sup> Christianity, represented by these rays, cannot free itself from historical time but must instead “become master over time.”<sup>15</sup>

While God has withheld the Jewish people from the progression of history by charting their course “over the river of time,” the Christian exists within and beside the historical advancement of worldly time. “The Christian, however, takes up the contest with the river. He lays alongside it the tracks of his eternal way. He who takes this train measures the place of the river he has just seen only according to the distance between the station of departure and that of arrival. He himself is always only on the track and his real interest is only that he is still always on the way, still always between departure and goal.”<sup>16</sup>

The Christian is not captive to the rushing flow of unoriented time, but neither is she entirely outside of time. Her existence in time is situated alongside the progression of secular time, whose beginning and end are uncertain. The Christian knows from whence her existence stems and to whither it heads, but she cannot but be in between these points. As long as the river of historical time continues to flow, the Christian will always be between beginning and end. For her beginning and end are equally near, and his current location is “entirely center, entirely between, entirely way.”<sup>17</sup>

The Christ event provides orientation for time, where everything before Christ’s birth is past, the last judgment is future, and “in between stands a single hour, a single day, the Christian world time in which everything is middle, everything equally light as day.”<sup>18</sup> Christianity’s mastery over time is symbolized by the fact that Christianity has imposed its calendar on the Western world.

Rosenzweig then proceeds to ask how Christianity achieves, maintains and lives out the mutual participation that binds it together across the ages and across the world. Like Judaism, the

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<sup>12</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 354.

<sup>13</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 355.

<sup>14</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 357.

<sup>15</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 357-358.

<sup>16</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 359-360.

<sup>17</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 360.

<sup>18</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 361.

collective existence of Christianity is eternal, though its configuration is contrasted to that of Judaism.<sup>19</sup> “Eternal life and eternal way—they are as different as the infinity of a point and of a line. The infinity of a point can only consist in the fact that it is never wiped away; therefore it is preserved in the eternal self-preservation of the blood that continuously begets. The infinity of a line however stops when it would no longer be possible to extend it; it consists in this possibility of unlimited extension.”<sup>20</sup> Whereas Judaism’s eternity consists in the prolongation of its inward existence, Christianity’s eternity is dependent upon its outward promulgation. For Christianity, mere preservation is not efficacious for eternal existence. “Christianity as eternal way must always spread further... Christianity must be missionary.”<sup>21</sup>

### Redemption: *The Star or Eternal Truth*

We can now see that Rosenzweig assigns to Judaism and Christianity unique—and separate—tasks, though only collectively do the two serve to usher in Redemption. According to one commentator, “Christianity and Judaism are internally incompatible but mutually reinforcing religious life-worlds, both of which stand as necessary witnesses to redemption.”<sup>22</sup> The Jew is born into his vocation and can no more escape it than he can escape his very self. His identity is “as an inner home that he may as little get rid of as the snail its house” for “he carries it everywhere he may ever walk or stand.”<sup>23</sup> His rebirth comes in the form of his recognizing the corporate nature of his vocation; that he does not respond alone, but as a part of his people.

For the Christian it is otherwise. “A Christian is made, not born.”<sup>24</sup> His awakening to vocation happens individually, at the moment when his pagan nature receives the orientation of Revelation. For the Christian this rebirth comes as a surprise and a radical re-orientation, whereas for the Jew it comes as an awakening to that which he already is. The Christian’s identity is not intrinsic to his being as is the Jew’s. Whereas the foundation of Christian identity lies in Christ, the Jewish people itself constitutes the foundation of its existence.

This fundamental contrast between Judaism and Christianity corresponds to their respective vocational trajectories. Just as rebirth for the Christian leads him away from his former self, “Christian life leads the Christian into the outside. The rays shine continually until

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting the phenomenological posture of Rosenzweig’s analysis of Judaism and Christianity. “The fact that, in the third book of *The Star*, Judaism and Christianity are described from the outside, through the forms of their social lives, and not from the inside through the specific structures of their religious consciousness (their theology, their dogma, their sacred texts), bears witness to Rosenzweig’s drive for systematic understanding. Judaism and Christianity are described here less as two particular religions than as *two categories of being*” (Mosès, 220-221).

<sup>20</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 362.

<sup>21</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 362.

<sup>22</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*, 134.

<sup>23</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 418.

<sup>24</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 419.

all that is outside is filled with the rays.”<sup>25</sup> For the Jew, however, rebirth is a leading back into one’s identity upon their first birth (and an entire story into which that birth occurred), and thus “Jewish life becomes remembrance and deepening and filling with a glow that which is innermost.”<sup>26</sup> Once again, these separate paths will endure until the eschaton wherein alone truth will be united.

Bearing witness for the Jewish people (as a “community of blood”<sup>27</sup>) takes the form of begetting future generations, of “sealing off the pure source of blood from foreign admixture,”<sup>28</sup> while Christianity’s witness takes a spiritual form, where “the pouring out of the Spirit in the uninterrupted stream of baptismal water from one to the other must establish the mutual participation of bearing witness.”<sup>29</sup>

As noted earlier, Christianity’s fundamental orientation vis-à-vis Judaism is different than Judaism’s orientation vis-à-vis Christianity. Although Christianity is aware of its dependence upon Judaism’s being for its own becoming, its “disguised enemies” tempt it to bury this connection and unhitch itself from the God of Israel. Rosenzweig denounces such a move, explaining that Christianity’s very existence withers if it loses sight of the soil from which it sprouted. In losing its historical rootedness in Judaism, Christianity loses its very God.

Even when it attempts to gain autonomy from its Jewish roots, Christianity cannot deny the indelible existence of the Jewish people. It is this people’s existence that translates into Christianity’s mission to the nations. After all, there can be no rays without the burning core.

It is through the complementary tasks of Judaism and Christianity—neither fully possessing the whole truth—that Redemption is ushered in, and God alone sees the expansive horizon of unified truth. It is constitutive of man that he cannot see the whole truth, and God “gives us only as much of the truth as we can bear as living creatures, namely our share. If he gave us more, if he gave us his share, the whole truth, then he would lift us out of the bounds of humanity.”<sup>30</sup>

#### IV. Assessment

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<sup>25</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 420.

<sup>26</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 420.

<sup>27</sup> According to Mosès, Rosenzweig is here contrasting “blood communities” with “spiritual communities,” whose attempt to endure always has a less certain outcome. “In order for a spiritual community to perpetuate itself, it is necessary that it recruit new members from one generation to the next and that its values never cease to be transmitted. This involves a constant pedagogical effort whose result is never certain. A spiritual community goes bankrupt and dies when the values on which it is founded are not transmitted anymore”(Mosès, 177). For “blood communities,” the transmission of communal identity takes place in the natural relation of father to son rather than the relation of master to pupil.

<sup>28</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 362.

<sup>29</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 362.

<sup>30</sup> *Star of Redemption*, 439.

Having briefly explored the parallel vocations of Judaism and Christianity in Rosenzweig's thought, let us now assess his ideas, specifically with regard to the goals and orientation of Messianic Judaism and the related issue of boundary definition.

It is important to note that Rosenzweig is not as concerned with drawing boundaries as with describing vocations. Given the way in which he conceives of Judaism and Christianity's respective tasks in salvation history, boundaries were scarcely an issue. In his theology, the boundaries are clearly defined by the very nature of the two communities. This does not mean, however, that we cannot learn from him as we navigate the turbulent waters of our own boundary definition.

Rosenzweig's system is an asset to Messianic Jewish theology because he offers parallel, separate, equally valid twin trajectories of Judaism and Christianity. Because Rosenzweig himself was a Jew, we don't have to convince him of the ongoing validity and import of Jewish life, existence, and distinctiveness. However, because of his lifelong positive disposition toward and assessment of Christianity, he does not hesitate to assign to it an equally essential role in final Redemption. *For Rosenzweig, Judaism and Christianity are equals, not rivals.* To endow Judaism and Christianity with separate but equally essential functions in salvation history is to already win half the battle.

Rosenzweig has offered to us the freedom to define ourselves in distinction from the self-definition of others *without negating their identity*. While Kinzer's bilateral ecclesiology is a wonderful example of this principle at work within the realm of the *ekklesia*, Rosenzweig reminds us that we can also apply this principle to our relationship with the larger Jewish world, as well as the larger Messianic world. Along the lines of Dan Juster's contention that those who disagree with a movement or organization should not attempt to subvert it from within but should rather create an alternate organization, our own identity as a movement somewhere between Judaism and Christianity seeks to do just that. While it is true that our self-definition needs to be more carefully established—a considerable task in itself—Juster's model encourages us to continue to trail blaze, and Rosenzweig assures us that we need not be exclusivistic with regard to God's means of ushering in Redemption.

Of course there is an aspect of our identity that we wish could be true for all Jewish believers, and that we seek to spread to Jews in the church. We do not believe that covenant faithfulness is optional for Jews, or that it merely helps us get in touch with our Jewish roots. We believe that it pleases God, and should therefore be normative for the Jewish community, Messianic or not. However, we are all too familiar with the detriment of overly assertive and thereby destructive Christian missionary attempts, and we would be loath to find ourselves repeating the church's mistake in this regard. While the relativism of the model presented here may seem too postmodern and undesirably compromising (heaven forbid we emulate Laodicea's lukewarm attitude), *the unwavering testimony of our lives may be our most effective witness*. Perhaps our "postmissionary" stance should also apply to the larger Messianic world.

The above statements notwithstanding, Rosenzweig's construal of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity is also highly problematic from a Messianic Jewish perspective. While in Rosenzweig's system Judaism and Christianity both exist under the same umbrella of Redemption, their trajectories are completely separate and their borders are not permeable. Even as he posits Christianity's fundamental reliance upon and indebtedness to



Judaism, he does not allow for overlap between the two. While this was largely a function of his historical setting, as students of his thought some 90 years later we have an entirely new set of possibilities and horizons open to us.

As Messianic Jews, we read the history and reality of Judaism and Christianity differently than Rosenzweig. For him, the two are fundamentally dissimilar and their vocations are complementary but essentially incompatible. For us, Yeshua serves as a link between the two communities, and our assertion of continuity rests on our understanding of Christology, covenant and ecclesiology. We draw different conclusions than Rosenzweig because we set out from a different theological berth. While we do need to be concerned with boundary definition, for us, admixture is not the ultimate threat to our identity. In the words of Miroslav Volf, “other cultures are not a threat to the pristine purity of our cultural identity, but a potential source of its enrichment. Inhabited by people who are courageous enough not simply to belong, intersecting and overlapping cultures can mutually contribute to the dynamic vitality of each.”<sup>31</sup> There is perhaps no cultural group for whom this is more true than for Messianic Jews. This concept, after all, is the very foundation of our identity.

Rosenzweig’s thought is invaluable in that it tips us off to a way of construing the different roles and vocations of Judaism and Christianity as a good thing, and serves to caution us from overlooking what really are and remain fundamental differences between the two. Nevertheless, we must insist on more continuity than he allows for. We serve as living examples that there can and should be some sort of overlap between Judaism and Christianity, a vista that Rosenzweig himself could have scarcely imagined.

But with our unique posture comes a unique responsibility—to shape the future of our still-marginalized and misunderstood insistence upon straddling two traditions. How can we build upon the foundation that Rosenzweig has laid for us? As we stand on the shoulders of this particular giant, how can we take hold of the new horizons that are open to us by furthering the trajectory Rosenzweig began? These are but a few of the questions of which it is our obligation and legacy to ask, and, eventually, to answer.

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<sup>31</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 52.